Review - Cities at the End of the World

https://www.e-ir.info/2015/02/21/review-cities-at-the-end-of-the-world/

VICTOR COUTINHO LAGE, FEB 21 2015

Cities at the End of the World: Using Utopian and Dystopian Stories to Reflect Critically on our Political Beliefs, Communities, and Ways of Life
By: David J. Lorenzo
New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014

Many of the most insightful recent efforts to rethink politics in contemporaneity come from engagements with alternative genres, such as films, literature, and arts. David J. Lorenzo's *Cities at the End of the World: Using Utopian and Dystopian Stories to Reflect Critically on our Political Beliefs, Communities, and Ways of Life* provides a good example of these efforts. In approaching literary texts – or, more precisely, utopian and dystopian stories, as indicated in the subtitle – Lorenzo raises throughout the text a number of political, social, economic and ethical problems and questions that establish a link between these stories and various dimensions of contemporaneity. More generally, *Cities at the End of the World* is a great contribution regarding the potential of the engagement between politics and literature.

The stories interpreted are the following: Thomas More's *Utopia* (ca.1515), Henry Neville's *Isle of Pines* (ca.1668), Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), Evgenie Zamyatin's *We* (ca.1921) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).[1] The text's main proposition in approaching these stories is to "[think] through fundamental elements of politics" (p.1) so that we can "understand *our* own foundational assumptions in order to confront current events and the *increasing obsolescence of current ways of thinking*" (p.210, italics added). In exposing this obsolescence, these "current events" bring to the fore how contemporary society is configured and the pressing need to "reflect critically" on political beliefs, communities and ways of life, as the subtitle indicates.

The depictions of the contemporary society in need to be "critically reflected on" are provided not only in the Introduction, but also, and very often, in the "Applications" subsections that Lorenzo inserts at the end of each chapter, after discussing the main dimensions of the stories. These subsections, accompanied by subsections on "Human Nature", are devoted to "[reconsidering] contemporary problems, rehearsing what the author of the story would have to say with regard to those problems and tests the plausibility of that response, as well as exploring the nature of those problems in the context of the story's assumptions and analyses of human nature and the human condition" (p.13).

Instead of providing the readers with conclusions, answers or solutions, Lorenzo's text opts for raising innumerable questions in each chapter. In this vein, the stories can be seen as points of departure to "clusters of questions that should be part of every person's self-reflection" (p.210). These clusters refer to the way humans are conceived, the kind of economic system people should embrace, the sources of disorder in societies, the nature of the good life and the traces of the bad life people want to avoid (see pp.210-1). So, if the text's proposition is to think through fundamental elements of politics, its "hope is that… the discussions can sharpen our attention to these questions and make them appear less academic and abstract" (p.211).

Given the scope of this text, my purpose is not to discuss the specificities of Lorenzo's provocative interpretation of each story, but to highlight some of the aspects I think constitute the general framing of his text. My main point is that

Review - Cities at the End of the World
Written by Victor Coutinho Lage

the interpretation of the utopian and dystopian stories selected is framed by more particular concerns with the increasing incapacity of the foundations held by a certain "we". As the subtitle of his text signalizes, there is an increasing mismatch between, on the one hand, "*our* beliefs" and, on the other hand, "*our* communities and ways of life". Tackling this mismatch, so I suggest, *Cities at the End of the World* expose its own *limits* – that is, the borders of political thinking that the text approaches, opening up potential problematizations that it sometimes does not develop itself.

From *and* to *a certain "we"*

Let me recall that *Cities at the End of the World* aims at thinking through "our" foundational assumptions, so that current events are confronted with a growing "obsolescence of current ways of thinking". This summarized proposition contains the interrelated aspects I want to put into relief here (even if I am not able to develop them at length). Following the pattern chosen by Lorenzo, I will put these aspects in the form of questions. Firstly, what or who is David J. Lorenzo referring to when he mentions "our own foundational assumptions"? In other words, who or what is this "we"? And, secondly, when Lorenzo claims that the "current ways of thinking" are "obsolete", what is his own reading of contemporaneity? In other words, how does he interpret the reality in relation to which he thinks the current ways of thinking are obsolete? These aspects seem interrelated since the obsolescence of thought is linked to the foundational assumptions of a certain "we" that dominates the text.[2]

In order to clarify what I mean by these aspects, I will stress some parts of the text. Right at the beginning of the Introduction, Lorenzo states that "[t]hinking through the fundamental elements of politics is always timely, but it is especially so now. Every 30 to 40 years nations rethink themselves… The *West* in general and the *United States* in particular is now at one of these points" (p.1, italics added). This gives us a glimpse of the layers of the "we" he often refers to: the "West" and the "United States".[3] In respect to the obsolescence of current ways of thinking, it seems to be related to the fact that "[w]e no longer need to come to grips with the Cold War and the Vietnam. We are dealing with the triumph of both sides of the cultural wars" (p.1), the "right" and the "left".[4] This triumph of both, the left and the right, has a crucial consequence to Lorenzo's interpretation of contemporary reality. I would even suggest that, in a sense, *Cities at the End of the World* speaks mainly *from* and *to* a certain West, particularly *from* and *to* a certain United States.

This is far from saying that the insights brought up in the text do not have a more general concern and wider implications. Most of the innumerable questions it raises can, indeed, be taken as potential venues to be explored in relation to other societies and/or other pressing issues of the so-called "West" and the so-called "United States". To put it differently, I am suggesting that, although explicitly concerned with specific political categories, the text exposes themes and problems that can be explored from and to other political categories, even potentially problematizing the categories it sometimes takes for granted. However long, the quotation below gives a good sense of what is at stake here:

the dichotomies that generated political debates over the past several decades do not necessarily make sense of our political and social environments. Debates over foreign policy take place in the context of American unipolar dominance rather than a bipolar world. Rather than arguing over whether big government or the private sector can deal more effectively with the problems of governing economic growth, elimination poverty, providing health care, and educating our children, we are faced with the failure of both to perform these tasks and the need to redefine economic well-being and the good life. The science fiction fantasies of computers and technology are now real, as are the economic possibilities of everyone living a relatively affluent life. We inhabit a more economically integrated and culturally pluralistic world than 40 years ago, all the while facing important problems involving pollution, the depletion of global resources, and probable climate change (pp.1-2).

From the above, it is plausible to say, on the one hand, that the current obsolete ways of thinking are those that still today depict the world as a dichotomous clash between capitalism and socialism (or communism), and between the left and the right. Both are anachronistic since they refer to past and already-gone external and internal realities – or, international and domestic realities (the latter counting mainly as the US domestic reality). On the other hand, the contemporary society depicted in the text is one of a unipolar prevalence of the US and of a more culturally pluralistic

Review - Cities at the End of the World
Written by Victor Coutinho Lage

and economically integrated world in which the failures in providing health care, education, and the eradication of poverty coexist with technologically advanced configurations and "the economic possibilities of everyone living a relatively affluent life".[5]

As I have said above, Lorenzo's interpretation of the stories selected is framed by more particular concerns regarding the incapacity of some "beliefs", held by a certain "we", to cope with "our communities and ways of life". Some extracts of the text reinforce the point I have been raising here.[6] In the chapter on *Utopia,* Lorenzo states that "one set of problems [*Utopia* raises] has to do with the growing disparities of wealth that the United States in particular is experiencing and the growing percentage of people who are incarcerated" (pp.36-7); another set of problems regards the "political corruption among American political officials and the polarized positions taken by US citizens…" (p.37). One of the questions he poses from his interpretation of this story is the following: "Is there something morally wrong with allowing private agents, such as producers of cultural artifacts to do so [molding citizens] with only minimal social control, as is the case *in the modern West*?" (p.40, italics added). In his discussion of *Isle of Pines,* he asks whether high levels of incarceration and other violence-related problems (such as high levels of crime, domestic terrorism, massacres in settled communities) occur "due to our unwillingness to emphasize virtues, particularly given the high standard of living enjoyed in industrialized nations, particularly the United States" (p.63).

In the subsection "the good life" of the chapter devoted to *Looking Backward*, he says that Edward Bellamy's "vision is often just as liberating and confining as the contemporary American ideal" and that the good life Bellamy draws for the future "closely resembles the life choice and consumption that is the popular ideal of *contemporary Westerners*" (p.85, italics added). In the "applications", Lorenzo declares to be concerned with "the fact that the *Western world* and the United States in particular are once again approaching the levels of economic inequality that marked the late nineteenth century" (p.94, italics added).[7] In the chapter on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he claims that George Orwell "would… point to contemporary developments associated with the early Cold War, 9/11, and terrorism to argue that the manipulation of war rhetoric has allowed elements within the US government over time to obtain vastly expanded powers over the actions and thoughts of citizens" (p.179). Moreover, according to Lorenzo, Orwell would also attest that contemporary problems "are just as much as with us now as they were in the 1940s" (p.182): "[e]conomic inequality has grown, the power of the state has increased, and the techniques by which the control of thought is contrived… are more prevalent now thanks to television and the internet" (p.182).

I hope it is already clear my interpretation of what Lorenzo's means when he says that there is an increasing obsolescence of "our" current ways of thinking about contemporary society. More precisely, I have pointed out, however briefly, the world *Cities at the End of the World* depicts and the insufficiencies it identifies in certain forms of interpretation of this world. Let me reinforce that I do not see the text as being of minor interest to situations other than the "Western" or particularly the "American" one. I do think, however, that in some instances Lorenzo takes for granted the deeply politicized category of "the West", which can also ultimately lead to the dichotomy of "the West" and the other ("the non-West" or "the Rest").[8] This can be problematic if it is taken into account that one of his starting points is that dichotomous categories are increasingly obsolete in contemporaneity.[9] I am certainly not implying that political categories can be transcended or transformed into universally inclusive ones; instead, my point here has been to expose the limits framing their uses.

A final note on a recent event: "**todos somos americanos**"

As I have mentioned, David J. Lorenzo's text provides the great contribution of highlighting the potential relevance the engagement with literature (in this case with utopian and dystopian stories) offers in reflecting on politics and its fundamental categories. In this vein, I have suggested that "the West" is one of those categories that need to be critically reflected on. The text opens up crucial avenues to rethink the contemporary and, ultimately, to reflect on the very political categories it seems in many instances to speak from and to throughout the text.

A recent event that highlights the contribution of Lorenzo's text can provide is the shift in US-Cuba relations that took place in December 2014. Let me quote few parts of Barack Obama's statement on December 17 and then indicate very briefly how they can be linked to *Cities at the End of the World.* **[10]** Obama stated that this shift represents "a

Review - Cities at the End of the World

Written by Victor Coutinho Lage

new chapter among the nations of the Americas". The relationship between US and Cuba have since 1961 "played out against the backdrop of the Cold War and America's steadfast opposition to communism". According to him, the policies that isolated the island over the last decades aimed at supporting "democracy and human rights" there, but, despite "rooted in the best of intentions", they have had "little effect", and the Cuban government kept Cuba "closed off from an interconnected world". With the "new approach" to Cuban policy, the US can "support the Cuban people and promote our values through engagement", since "isolation has not worked" in the last several decades. The measures seek the advancement of "freedom and openness" and they can "do more to empower the Cuban people". Obama also welcomed Cuban decision to "continue increasing engagement with international institutions, like the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross, that promote universal values", but he claimed to have no illusions about "the continued barriers to freedom that remain for ordinary Cubans".

Obama said to be "convinced that through a policy of engagement, we can more effectively stand up for our values and help the Cuban people help themselves as the move into the 21st century": "[t]o the Cuban people, America extends a hand of friendship. Some of you have looked to us as a source of hope, and we will continue to shine a light of freedom… Today, the United States wants to be a partner in making the lives of ordinary Cubans a little bit easier, more free, more prosperous". Obama also took the opportunity to thank Pope Francis, "whose moral example shows us the importance of pursuing the world *as it should be*, rather than simply settling for the world as it is" [italics mine].

This world as it should be comes again a little later in the statement, when Obama affirms that "[a] future of greater peace, security and democratic development is possible if we work together… to advance the dreams of our citizens". Despite recognizing that "change is hard", Obama holds that "we are making these changes because it is the right thing to do. Today, America chooses to cut loose the shackles of the past so as to reach for a better future – for the Cuban people, for the American people, for our entire hemisphere, and for the world".

Obama's statement carries many of the fundamentals that constitute the limits of *Cities at the End of the World* – that is, the borders of political thinking that text approaches, even if it does not always problematize them. The "American values", mainly "freedom", is constantly resorted to, in order to shed light on a possible better future – of greater peace, security and democratic development – for the Cuban people, allegedly restricted over the past decades due to the constraints imposed by the communist party led by the Castros, and for the world. There is also the concern to link these values to a universal ground, not only mentioning the efforts of Pope Francis, but also of the international institutions. Moreover, the articulation of past, present and future is brought up, in that the historical difficulties in the relations between both countries make change hard in the present, but do not preclude the possibility of the US to shine a light of freedom to Cubans.[11]

Pushing things a little further, one can interpret the statement as a depiction of the US as a provider of hope towards the inclusion of the Cuban people and of the whole hemisphere – "*todos somos americanos*" – in the utopian world realized, or at least more advanced, on the shores of the US.[12] The Cuban communist party is at the same time linked to the realization of some dystopian traces raised by Lorenzo, particularly the constraints on the ordinary citizens. It is in this, and in many other aspects that I am not able to develop here, that I think *Cities at the End of the World* can contribute in opening venues of interpretation that help problematize, for instance, the economic, social, political and ethical values permeating Obama's statement and other contemporary issues.

In sum, David J. Lorenzo's text is an expression of how rich the engagement with literature can be to a critical reflection on politics. In the beginning of the text, he stresses that the title of the book refers to the descriptions of "endings" given by the utopian and dystopian stories: "'The ends of the world' refers importantly to frontiers, in that these stories exist at the *limits of our political imagination*" (p.2). I have suggested here that Lorenzo's story itself exists at the *limits of certain political imagination*, contributing to exploring them, even if it sometimes takes some political categories for granted.

Notes

To Rafael, whom this text may never reach.

Review - Cities at the End of the World

Written by Victor Coutinho Lage

[1] In the "Notes on Reading the Text", Lorenzo writes that, although "located in separate chapters and capable of standing alone, the discussions of these stories are meant to be read in pairs:*Utopia* with *Isle of Pines, Looking Backward* with *News from Nowhere*, and *We* with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" (p.vii). In a way, what I will propose below is one possible interpretation of all these stories taken together, concerning certain limits that frame Lorenzo's interpretation of them.

[2] Another point worth exploring from *Cities at the End of the World* is the different articulations between past, present and future that the utopian and dystopian stories provide. Lorenzo defines utopian stories as "tales told about imagined communities that provide through their organization of political, economic, and social matters a superior way of living when compared to contemporary communities" (p.5) and dystopian stories as those that "serve as warnings regarding the future of contemporary society" (p.6): "[s]o where utopias point to the future as potentially providing a better way of life, dystopias argue that we may face a future in which life is much worse than is currently the case" (p.7). In this sense, the crucial critical reflection opened up by the text is the potential problematization of any attempt to establish a single historical interpretation to contemporary societies, such as the linear and progressist conception of history that underlines many current ways of thinking. It is beyond my scope here to develop this point, however.

[3] For the lack of a better term, I mention here "layers", and not "levels", of "we", to avoid the interpretation that the relation of "the West" and "the United States" can be taken as a matter of "level of analysis", as if one could talk in terms of more or less independent levels of the "individual", the "state" and the "relations between states" (this one generally referred to as "international system", "society" or "community"). If it were possible here to push this discussion a little further, one could remind oneself of the debates surrounding the problematization of the disciplinary (and ontological) separation between "political science" and "international relations", the former supposedly dedicated to the study of domestic, or internal, political relations, and the latter supposedly dedicated to the study of international, or external, political relations. David J. Lorenzo does not explicitly tackle this point, neither am I stating that his text reproduces this separation.

[4] More specifically, according to Lorenzo, the triumph of the "right" is expressed in the "outlawing of the consumption of most intoxicating substances, resulting in a high rate of incarceration and the perpetuation of drug wars" (p.1), while the triumph of the "left" can be seen in the redefinition of "privacy and expression, ironically resulting in a reinforcement of capitalism's privileging of individualism, a deterioration of public and social solidarity, and a fierce conflict with the government over security requirements in an age of possible terrorist threats" (p.1).

[5] If interpreted as a general statement on the current worldwide condition, this last phrase strikes as highly controversial, to say the least, given that, to take just one indicator, more than 1.2 billion people in the world live below the poverty line and 1.5 billion people live in multidimensional poverty, according to the 2014 Human Development Report (Last access: December 23, 2014). Nevertheless, if "everyone" in this statement refers to those living in the so-called "developed countries", then maybe it is plausible. This account can be read as an expression of what I am stressing in relation to the "we" that permeates the text. Note 1: the international poverty line is stipulated as $1.25 (in purchasing power parity terms) a day. Note 2: Multidimensional Poverty Index measures the population that is multidimensionally poor, taking into account indicators of health, education and housing quality.

[6] As I have pointed out in the beginning of this text, Lorenzo's depictions of the contemporary society are provided not only in the Introduction, but most often in the subsections "Applications" and "Human Nature".

[7] If one considers the case of Brazil, for instance, which I assume would be part of "the West" in Lorenzo's account, one observes that the average *per capita* income increased 23.7% from 2001 to 2009 and the income of the 10% poorest increased 69.08% in the same period, according to a study of 2011 elaborated by the*Centro de Políticas Sociais* (Center of Social Policies) of *Fundação Getúlio Vargas* (Getúlio Vargas Foundation) (see NERI, Marcelo Cortes. *Desigualdade de Renda na Década.* Rio de Janeiro: FGV/CPS, 2011. Last accessed: December 23, 2014). This study states that "in Brazilian History, statistically documented since 1960, there is nothing similar to the reduction of income inequality observed since 2001" (p.46). I am not mentioning that in order to provide a counter-narrative of reality to Lorenzo's depiction. Rather, my point to further explore the insightful questions he raises, in

order to problematize some categories he assumes, more specifically "the West".

[8] Let me note that, although Lorenzo uses systematically the concept of "West", the same is not true to "East", "non-West" or "Rest". My point is to signalize that his uses of "West" can ultimately imply these other political categories.

[9] Some of Lorenzo's references to countries that are presumably not in "the West" are telling in this sense. For example, he states that countries such as North Korea and the Soviet Union "have come closest to reducing their members to ciphers and machines" (p.148); he also implies that, in the Soviet Union, in Cuba and in the People's Republic of China, a "tactic of popular mobilization" relying on a "military metaphor of people volunteering for armies" has been "tried and found wanting" (p.95); later, he affirms that Cuba, the Soviet Union and mainland China have sustained a behavior of "energetic devotion" and "potentially fanatical and even fully fanatical" mobilization for "significant periods of time" (see p.178). I do not think it would be implausible to interpret these references as expressions of a West/non-West dichotomy that permeates the text.

[10] To be clear: it is not my point to agree or disagree with Obama's statement on Cuba, but to highlight some of its aspects that can be interpreted from Lorenzo's insights. The full statement is available here. Last accessed: December 23, 2014.

[11] If one had to provide a counter-narrative to the historical assumptions underlying Obama's statement, it would suffice to mention the support the US provided to many coups and dictatorships in Latin America in the second half of the 20th century. The shine of freedom was not exactly the main concern in US engagement with countries such as Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay.

[12] Obama's statement does not frame the world in terms of "West" and "non-West", neither it mentions "Europe" when he talks about the values the US holds. It does refer, however, to universal values, such as freedom, and to a morally right thing to do, both facing barriers that have been allegedly raised by the Cuban government in the last decades.

About the author:

Victor Coutinho Lage is a PhD Candidate at the International Relations Institute of PUC-Rio (IRI/PUC-Rio), Brazil, and is a Faculty Member at IRI/PUC-Rio and at Faculdade Getúlio Vargas of Rio de Janeiro (FGV-Rio), Brazil. His PhD dissertation is on the formative process of modernity in Brazil in the XX and XXI centuries. His main research interests are: interpretations of modernity in Brazil, political theory and philosophy, theories of international relations. Email:victorcoutinholage@yahoo.com.br